DAWN

OPINION

Unwanted, unneeded

THE festive mood from the New Year's celebrations had not even begun to wear off, when the world appeared ready to plunge headfirst into another round of violence and war. With protests against economic hardships turning into a bout of serious civil unrest in Iran, US President Donald Trump had on Friday issued an unwarranted threat to "respond" if Iran's security forces killed protesters, prompting Tehran to respond with the 'warning' that such a development would destabilise the entire region. What was being said between the lines does not need to be spelt out for anyone. The two countries had come face to face during the Twelve-Day War between Iran and Israel in June this past year, when the US had bombed three Iranian nuclear sites, and Iran had retaliated by hitting America's Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar before a ceasefire was reached. Unsurprisingly, Israel also features prominently in the recent flare-up between them.

But Mr Trump's interventionist aspirations have not been limited to Iran. On Saturday, after a night of bombs and terror in Venezuela, the US president announced on his social media platform that Venezuelan President Nicol s Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, had been captured and flown out of the country. A US official later told the media that special forces troops had taken part in America's first direct intervention in Latin America since 1989. It is worth mentioning that Mr Maduro had just days ago attempted to engage with Mr Trump on narco-trafficking and illegal migration, both of which had been sore issues in Mr Trump's relationship with his southern neighbour. However, Mr Maduro personally believed that Mr Trump was really after Venezuela's considerable oil reserves — a perception that was reinforced by multiple leaders from the Trump administration making varying claims on Venezuela's resources.

The Venezuelan context is important for Iran and, indeed, the Middle East. It establishes that there are no limits or international laws when the powerful decide to seize what they want. There is no doubt that the Iranian people are unhappy with their government for the economic misery they have been suffering. But whatever their grievances, they are for the people of Iran to settle amongst themselves. That Israel is attempting to fan the unrest and the US is publicly providing guarantees to protesters suggests that the old playbook is being used again: yet another country is to be destabilised as an insurance policy for the state of Israel. The wider region and Iran's neighbours, in particular, should take a stand against such interventionism, lest they want chaos and unrest at their own doorsteps. Whatever the Iranian government's failings, it has kept order despite being placed under immense economic strain by those now pretending to be friends of its people.

More than a number

MOVING into 2026, Pakistan stands as the world's fifth most populous country, with more than 255m people. This fact is often viewed as a crisis to be dealt with. Yet population size itself is not the problem. The real question is whether the state treats population dynamics as a liability to be endured or a strategic force to be governed in pursuit of development. There were signs in 2025 that thinking has begun to shift. As noted by the United Nations Population Fund, improvements in reproductive health services, population data systems and youth engagement point to a growing recognition that demography sits at the heart of economic planning, social stability and climate resilience. Better coordination between federal and provincial authorities also suggests a welcome, if tentative, move away from fragmented policymaking. Yet challenges prevail. Maternal mortality is still high, millions of women lack access to family planning, early marriages persist and gender-based violence remains widespread — issues which shape fertility trends, labour participation and human capital formation. In climate-exposed districts, weak health systems and limited access to services deepen vulnerability, reinforcing inequalities. The evidence leaves little room for debate. Expanding sexual and reproductive health services, keeping girls in school, and enabling women's participation in the economy are among the most effective ways to support informed reproductive choices and balanced population growth. Countries that have neglected these fundamentals have paid the price in stalled growth and social strain.

Where Pakistan continues to falter is governance. Policies are announced and commitments made, but delivery is weak and accountability thinner still. This is most visible in fiscal planning. The NFC award relies overwhelmingly on population size, rewarding headcounts rather than outcomes. The result is a system that does little to incentivise better health, education, or gender equality. A forward-looking state would reward progress in lower maternal mortality, higher female labour participation, improved education outcomes, and greater climate resilience. The new year offers a window. Moving from promises to progress will require political will, sustained domestic financing and strong oversight. Population is already shaping Pakistan's future. The challenge now is to govern it as an asset, not merely count it as a problem.

Extreme move

THE life sentences handed down by an anti-terrorism court to bloggers and journalists for their alleged role in the events of May 9, 2023, raise questions about proportionality, due process and the future of free expression in Pakistan. No doubt, the violence that followed the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan, including attacks on military and state installations, crossed several red lines. Similarly, much of the digital commentary circulating at the time was excessive, speculative, irresponsible and, in cases, non-factual. While criticism by some of the convicted had not breached acceptable bounds, the others had cultivated audiences through sensationalism, half-truths and a combative tone that blurred the line between opinion and incitement. This deserves criticism. Freedom of expression does not grant a licence to spread disinformation or inflame passions during moments of crisis.

It is also worth recalling the irony that several of these voices were once prominent cheerleaders for PTI during its ascent, attacking its political opponents, including Nawaz Sharif and his party, without attracting similar legal scrutiny from the state. The selective nature of accountability weakens the moral authority of the state's actions. Yet acknowledging these realities does not make the sentence any less unsettling. Handing out life terms to journalists and bloggers, following trials in absentia and under the sweeping ambit of anti-terrorism laws, is disproportionate to the alleged offences of speech and commentary. Measured legal remedies were available. Where content was defamatory, demonstrably false or malicious, civil defamation proceedings or narrow criminal charges could have addressed the harm without invoking the most extreme state instruments. By choosing the harshest path, the authorities risk setting a precedent that may threaten legitimate journalism and dissent far beyond the individuals involved. Stability is linked to maintaining a fair justice system. A secure state should be able to confront irresponsible speech without resorting to excessive penalties.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

Terrorism data deficit

In the absence of authentic official data, research groups rely heavily on open sources.

PAKISTAN'S power circles are jubilant over their successes in 2025, which stemmed from multiple factors, the most significant being the restoration of trust with the US. Whatever factors compelled the Trump administration to enhance engagement with Pakistan, this shift has altered Pakistan's regional position primarily in South and West Asia, and partially in Central Asia.

The change in the US attitude towards Pakistan began early this year, even before the May stand-off with India, when American President Donald Trump and Centcom chief Michael Kurilla praised Pakistan's contribution to the war against terrorism and thanked the country for handing over the mastermind of the Abbey Gate terrorist attack by IS-K to the US.

Here lies Pakistan's real strength: while engaged in a prolonged war against terrorism and dealing with multiple strands of terrorist groups, including the Taliban, who now rule Afghanistan, the country has gained experience in managing global threats and winning the trust of international partners. Action against IS-K opened several doors for Pakistan in regional and defence cooperation with many Muslim countries, including the much-discussed Pak-Saudi defence pact. It remains to be seen how far these engagements will go and whether Pakistan can translate them into tangible economic and political gains.

However, the internal security front has become more critical, as religiously motivated terrorist groups and Baloch sub-national militant organisations continue to thrive, complicating the country's security challenges. State institutions responsible for addressing internal security challenges and terrorism threats have failed to provide authentic statistics on terrorist activities and the state's response to them. The official body tasked with this responsibility, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta), offers little substance on its website beyond a list of proscribed organisations; the rest consists of claims without supporting evidence. At times, provincial law-enforcement agencies issue figures, but these efforts are inconsistent and lack detail. ISPR frequently conducts media briefings and presents statistics, but beyond numbers, substantive details of counterterrorism operations are rarely provided.

Law-enforcement agencies cite various justifications, often claiming that while they compile data, they do not make it public because it may be legally contested. Such claims will be questioned unless tested. Meanwhile, several private research organisations perform this function by publishing periodic and annual reports on terrorism trends in the country.

These research groups face their own constraints. In the absence of an authentic official database, they rely heavily on open sources. Such information typically comes from ISPR press releases and, in some cases, provincial law-enforcement agencies. Another source is the monthly and annual statistics issued by terrorist organisations themselves. These groups exaggerate their operations, but without an official database, it becomes difficult to fully refute their claims.

Organisations compiling terrorism-related data in Pakistan generally follow two approaches: some rely exclusively on officially confirmed media reports, while others cross-check with data released by terrorist organisations. Verification on the ground has become nearly impossible, as local media in conflict zones often cannot report incidents, and even when reports reach newsrooms, editors tend to prioritise official press releases.

The purpose of outlining the background of terrorism-related data compilation is twofold: first, to show that Pakistan has faced severe terrorism for decades yet still lacks an authentic database; and second, to highlight that data compiled by various organisations shows fluctuations. Nevertheless, a review of reports released this year reveals a serious trend: the terrorist threat is worsening, not only in operational terms but also in terms of ideological, political and tactical realignments.

For instance, an annual security report issued by the Pak Institute for Studies and Peace Studies, which has been conducting this assessment since 2005, reported a sharp surge in militant violence in 2025. A total of 699 terrorist attacks were recorded nationwide, an increase of 34 per cent compared to the previous year. This renewed wave of violence claimed at least 1,034 lives, marking a 21pc rise in terrorism-related fatalities. In addition, 1,366 people were injured during the year, underscoring the growing human cost of terrorism.

The report notes that security and law-enforcement personnel bore the brunt of the violence. Of the total fatalities recorded, 437, or more than 42pc, were personnel from security and law-enforcement agencies, including 174 policemen, 122 soldiers, 107 FC members (Frontier Corps and Federal Constabulary), 21 Levies personnel, 12 paramilitary troops, and one Rangers official. Civilians were also heavily affected, with 354 non-combatants killed. Meanwhile, 243 militants died either in suicide attacks or during retaliatory fire by security forces.

Balochistan and KP's tribal districts remain the most critical regions. These developments triggered coercive responses by security forces against terrorist hideouts across the border and led to heightened tensions with Afghanistan, which Pakistan accuses of hosting and supporting terrorist groups, including TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army.

The success graph of Pakistan's security forces also remained high last year, with 2025 recording the highest number of terrorists killed in a single year. Nonetheless, Pakistan seeks international acknowledgment of these successes. However, the rising number of terrorist attacks indicates that while the kinetic approach is yielding results, the non-kinetic approach is not adequately complementing military operations.

A weak non-kinetic framework is evident in the state's inability to develop a verifiable terrorism database, even as state institutions expect Pakistan not to be ranked highly in global terrorism databases.

Nacta and law-enforcement agencies in Pakistan hardly grasp that the most reputable global organisations require verifiable data, yet Pakistan's LEAs insist that the world should simply believe their claims. Despite this, Pakistan faced difficulties with the FATF due to the submission of non-verifiable data, and it remained on the grey list until the country presented improved statistics. ■

The writer is a security analyst.

BY ABBAS NASIR

Smoking the peace pipe dream

RANA Sanaullah, the prime minister's adviser on political affairs, has proposed a way out of the current quagmire where the 'big five' could sit and find common ground, following confidence-building measures, but his statement needs to be examined to ascertain whether it is legitimate cause for optimism or a 'non-starter'.

Don't get me wrong. As a long-term believer in political reconciliation being crucial to creating the right environment for investment in the economy to grow it and to reduce the scale of abject poverty in the country, I would like to believe Rana Sanaullah's suggestion is a viable one and could form the basis for dialogue. But is it?

First of all, let's see what he meant by the big five. In a TV interview, he spelt it out as "my leaders" Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Nawaz Sharif, President Asif Ali Zardari, former prime minister-PTI founder Imran Khan and "you know who the fifth is" without naming anyone. His list of those who may need to smoke the peace pipe points to the fate of his suggestion.

As far as the establishment is concerned, the military spokesman has been on record saying that his institution is not the one to engage in a dialogue with the imprisoned leader and if the latter desired talks, the government should be approached.

For his part, Imran Khan has also so far unequivocally stated that he sees no point in talks with the government and the only meaningful dialogue that's possible is directly with the military establishment as it is the sole decision-maker.

So, for Rana Sahib's suggestion to gain traction, two of his 'big five' players will need to shift from their current positions and unless he knows something about a change of mind in either one or both quarters, a headway can be wished but not evidenced.

If we zoom out of the tight focus, any attempt at reconciliation seems even more unlikely, simply because Imran Khan has taken a maximalist position, whether you agree with him or not, that he was cheated out of power in the February 2024 elections and any discussion or dialogue must include a pathway straight back to power for him.

Regardless of the merit of his argument, the ground reality can be gauged from the passage of the 26th and 27th Amendments to the Constitution, with yet another one, the 28th, said to be around the corner, as well as from last May's clash with India, leading to the elevation to field marshal and Chief of Defence Forces, of the four-star army chief in addition to his own role.

Observers note that he is now more comfortably ensconced in power than ever before, and as one journalist said, he has taken Pakistan from a pariah state to a player on the regional and global stage. No matter how precarious that status may be, given the fickle nature of US President Trump's temperament, he still mentions with 'admiration', 'my favourite field marshal', and for now it weighs heavily in the latter's favour.

> Unless Rana Sanaullah knows something about a change of mind in either one or both quarters, a headway can be wished but not evidenced.

As far as the civilian part of the hybrid set-up is concerned, it knows well what the ground reality was before, during and after the 2024 elections, and how it came into sharing some power and glory too after the May 2025 clash with India. The civilian part so far seems to have made little headway in the one thing it was apparently tasked to accomplish by the senior partner.

And that was to prepare a viable alternative to PTI's narrative, with the latter having taken a head start and maintaining its lead — and here facts don't matter half as much as what the support base is willing to believe.

The government is still struggling, though one can see the effort and the expenditure that is going into the area. It still needs time to catch up, if at all it can.

It can only hope that Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif's administration is able to deliver over the term of the current parliament in its support base, the country's most populous province, and revive the PML-N's fortunes, and that elections are not held before that for whatever reason.

I suspect it will have to live with the fear that its fate in Punjab may mirror the PPP's when PML-N itself displaced it. Once the electorate's hearts and minds have been lost, the fall from grace has a degree of permanence to it; performance and governance, too, matter to a point and not beyond. Perceptions matter more.

One need only look at the abysmal performance of the Usman Buzdar government in Punjab during the PTI's time in power. The PTI support in the province has more to do with the success of the narrative of being wronged rather than its performance and governance whilst in office.

At the end of the day, the state of the economy affects everyone. The team of economic managers may have stabilised the economy, but investment, growth and job creation are still insignificant. MoUs don't translate into positive economy numbers. Local and foreign investors remain risk-averse and there can be no perceived risk greater than the uncertainty triggered by political upheaval.

Politics is the art of the possible. But in our case, uncertainty will remain till principles and personal issues, as manifest in unsavoury attacks, are not separated; till all those in government or in opposition are willing to show accommodation. In asking each party to step back from confrontation, I have faced criticism from those who say I am equating usurpers with victims.

I am not. All I am saying is that you have tried and failed to effect change via street power. Recent court verdicts lend credence to this view. Is it time to try a change of political strategy to take a different route to your goals? If you think it isn't, then any reconciliation is a pipe dream. ■

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